

# MONTECITO

## MAGAZINE



Cathy Givens ©

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*From Montecito's Bonnymede  
to San Miguel Island*



# ISLAND MAIL

Seventy-five years ago on San Miguel Island, an unusual drone overhead caused the Lester family—Herbie, Elise, and their daughters, 3-year-old Marianne and infant Betsy—to perk up their ears. A few minutes later, a biplane appeared in the sky and landed, much to the Lester family's amazement, in a sheep pasture near their rustic ranch home. Out stepped the pilot, George Hammond, the first person to land a plane on the island.

Story by Judy Pearce



PHOTOS COURTESY SETH HAMMOND





Page 34, top ~ Herbie Lester's hand-drawn "airmail" stamp on an envelope addressed to Sir George Fiske Hammond, Hammond Field, Kingdom of San Miguel.

Page 34, bottom ~ Right to left: Ready for take off! George Hammond and his wife Katherine, along with Elise Lester and her two daughters, Betsy and Marianne, prepare to board the Beechcraft Model 17 Staggerwing for a flight back to San Miguel Island after a vacation on the mainland, 1938.

Above ~ Herbie and Elise Lester with their young daughters Betsy (left) and Marianne, opening their airmail on San Miguel Island. In her recently published book, *San Miguel Island, My Childhood Memoir*, Betsy Lester Roberti writes, "Father had a custom canvas mailbag made, complete with leather reinforcements on the top and bottom. There was a strap at the top that ran through metal rings and could be padlocked at the back." The mailbag is displayed at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum, on loan from George's son, Seth Hammond.



George Hammond had flown his Travel Air biplane from the family estate, Bonnymede, on the shores of Montecito. His mother, Eastern socialite Esther Fiske Hammond, had bought up beachside acreage west of the Miramar Hotel starting in 1911, and eventually amassed a 64-acre property. Upon George's marriage to Katherine Cheny in 1936, Esther gifted him 17 acres of the family holdings. A pilot and aircraft engineer, George named his property Flaps Down and was able to fly his own planes in and out of Montecito, taking off from the 10-acre Bonnymede lawn (turned airstrip) next door.

The Hammond family was well-connected in Montecito and East Coast society, and George was also making a name for himself in the flying world during a time when records were being broken and historic flights were taking place. He worked on Charles Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis" and flew with Lindbergh testing the famed aircraft.

It was the combination of these two worlds that serendipitously led George Hammond to fly out to San Miguel Island for the first time on July 22, 1934. His mother was entertaining Eunice "Una" Felton at Bonnymede, and Una mentioned that her cousin, Elise Lester, lived on the remote island off the Santa Barbara coast. Esther Hammond politely suggested that George might fly

out to San Miguel to meet the Lesters. George rose to the occasion, partly as a social courtesy, and partly for adventure.

He recorded his initial trip in his logbook: "San Miguel Island & Return—42 mins over 48 back with John Wearden." (Wearden worked for Hammond as a mechanic at *Flaps Down*.) Elsewhere, he fleshed out his account: "I made my first landing on San Miguel Island July 22, 1934 in my biplane. I landed in a very short field just north of the house. Interrupting the quiet solitude of this windswept island, brought out a very surprised Mrs. Lester to greet me. This was the beginning of a great and lasting friendship with the Lesters."

This pivotal event also established an important link between San Miguel and the mainland. San Miguel is a windswept, 10,000-acre island, 44 miles from Santa Barbara. At the time, rancher Robert Larkin Brooks leased San Miguel from the U.S. government and ran a sheep operation there (see *Montecito Magazine*, Fall 2008). In 1929 Brooks asked his friend Herbert "Herbie" Lester to move to the island and manage the business. A World War I veteran, Herbie had been injured in the war and suffered from shell shock. Seeking a low-stress lifestyle, he jumped at the opportunity to live quietly on the island.

In 1930 Herbie married Elizabeth "Elise" Sherman and brought his bride home to the rustic is-

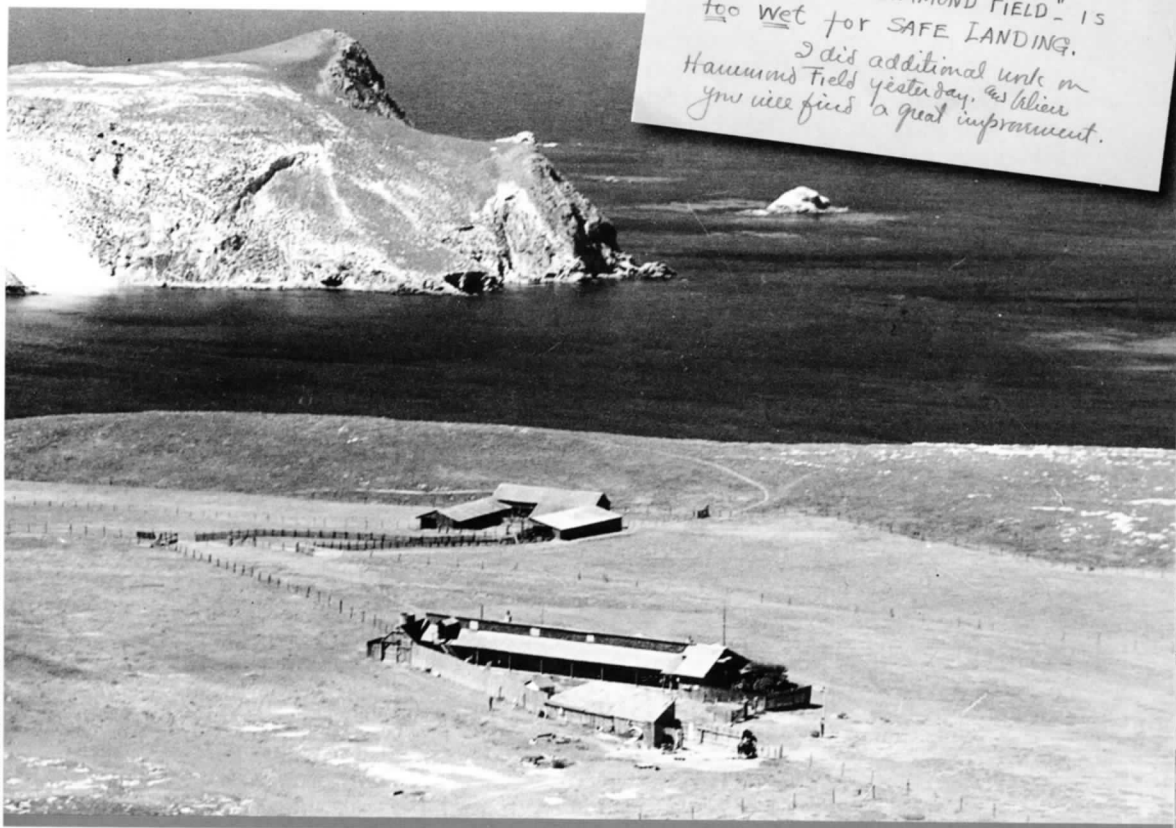
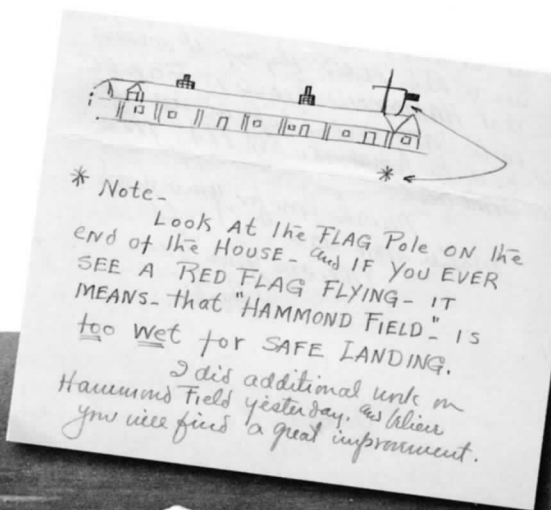
land ranch, which he called Rancho Rambouillet after the breed of sheep they raised. The Lesters were the only year-round residents on the island, save the sheep and other fauna. Travel to and from the island was difficult at best, and the Lesters rarely left. A boat trip from Santa Barbara to San Miguel took at least six hours, often over rough seas. Two childbirth excursions to the mainland were Elise's only trips away from the island until George Hammond flew into their lives in 1934. In Herbie Lester's Rancho Rambouillet guestbook, Hammond marked his first arrival with a few simple words...

George Fiske Hammond  
340 Channel Drive  
Santa Barbara California  
Phone 92135

Landed J-5 Travel Air NC477N on Island at  
11:15 AM Lower Pasture

In his memoirs, George Hammond describes his first visits to San Miguel...

*In the first week I made three landings. Herbie and I made a survey of the area to pick out a site for a permanent landing field which was three-fourths of a mile from the house. Arrival of supplies by boat was extremely haphazard and irregular. It was obvious that a more reliable*



Left ~ An aerial view of George Hammond's Montecito airstrip marked with a white X. George wrote, "All flights at this time to San Miguel, had originated at Bonnymede, my family residence, where I maintained a private air strip." Unlike the one on San Miguel, the Montecito landing field was not made of humble dirt. It was a ten-acre lawn that sloped from gentle bluffs to the ocean. It also served as a golf course for his mother and a polo field for his sisters. It was a very convenient location for launching air excursions to the island.

Above ~ An aerial view of San Miguel's Rancho Rambouillet, circa 1938. The Lesters' lives changed dramatically after George Hammond landed in a sheep pasture near the ranch house.

system was imperative to sustain this new family on this lovely and remote island. So the volunteer flying of food supplies and mail was commenced at once. When Herbie heard the plane circling around the home, he would hitch up the horse to a drag, and with 'Pomo' the dog, they would go down to get the mail [and supplies].

Three weeks after the first flight, Herbie Lester wrote a guestbook entry that described the growing role of George Hammond in his life...

*George Fiske Hammond. Arrived in his Travel Air Airplane #477N. J-5 Wright 220 HP engine. Landed on "Hammond Field" at 4 P.M. Flew over alone and brought supplies and provisions that Steve took to his home, & very kindly delivered them to San Miguel. A Heavy Load - Sack of Potatoes, Sack Chicken Feed - 15 lbs Lard - George brought Marianne a bottle of Certified Milk - 2 doz eggs and Loaves of Bread & Vegetables.*

Two weeks later, Herbie's entry mentions that George "very kindly brought us ... 6 Bottles of Balboa Beer - Newspapers & magazine and Schrafts Chocolate Almonds."

Herbie Lester and George Hammond embarked on a close friendship with those early flights. Herbie named the landing strip "Hammond Field" and they set about improving it for safer landings, in-

cluding the early addition of a windsock so George could gauge the winds. He began flying to San Miguel regularly, as he now felt he had "a sensible reason for island hopping and landing in disastrous fogs and winds on remote and rough terrain."

The flights were a godsend for the Lesters, and Herbie Lester was always on the lookout for George Hammond's safety as he pioneered island flight in those early days. In letters Herbie Lester sent to George by boat in 1934, we get a glimpse of the dangers George faced regarding island flight...

*We have had light showers this afternoon, but not enough to make landing dangerous.... remember to look at the flag pole at the end of the house, and when you see a red flag flying, it means that Hammond Field is too WET to be SAFE.... I hope we will not have to hoist the red flag for some time.*

*Please do as I suggest and if necessary you can easily obtain a permit to carry your Smith and Wesson Revolver, when you're flying over here, as in case you ever have to make a forced landing on either Santa Cruz or Santa Rosa islands. It is well to have a weapon in case you meet some wild boars.*

*It was quite threatening to rain with all those dark clouds, so we trust it was the looks of the*



*Above ~ After their marriage in 1936, George and Katherine often flew together to the island with mail and supplies. George wrote about "carrying all sort of supplies—from chickens, cement, radios, windmill parts, batteries, and crates containing 19 dozen eggs—to delicacies supplied by the family at Bonnymede, which at one time or another included home-made ice cream and cake, squabs, fresh garden vegetables and various and assorted presents for the Lester children and their parents on suitable occasions. Friends of our family often brought things to Bonnymede to be included on the next flight to San Miguel."*

*Right ~ Newlyweds George & Katherine pose next to a makeshift welcome sign at "Hammond Field" inscribed "Just Married, Welcome Bride & Groom. Many Years of Health-Happiness to George & Katherine."*

*Assuming you of my appreciation  
for all your kind friendship, and  
wishing you and yours - continued  
health and happiness for many many  
new years -  
Sincerely,  
"Herbie"*

sky and possibly the wind that caused you to return instead of landing out here. The minute I saw you I went directly out to Hammond Field thinking you might cruise about and return. I waited out there over an hour and then decided you had no doubt returned home.... I am very glad you use such good judgment.

The correspondence continued for seven more years, and in 1941 Herbie was still watching out for the safety of his friend:

*We have had another .53" of rain and unless we get a lot of high wind and sunshine, I do not believe Hammond Field will be dry enough for you to land for at least a week or 10 days so please play safe, as above everything else, we never want you to run the risk of an accident. It would ruin the years of happiness we have enjoyed over here through your rare friendship. The next time you fly over please fly over the ranch house a couple of times—and I will wave my American Flag if I consider Hammond Field is dry enough....*

George Hammond became a favorite visitor of the family, often elegantly clad in a suit and tie for the flight. Within the first few months, it became apparent the whole family was growing close to him. "Marianne asks every day for her Uncle George Hammond," Elise wrote in a letter to George, adding, "I wish also to express appreciation and thanks to you for all your thoughtful and generous gifts to us and my children."

In a letter home to her mother, Elise wrote, *It is about our new young flying friend, George Fiske Hammond, from Santa Barbara.... What a charming and thoughtful friend he has turned out to be.... Last weekend he brought over his brother-in-law, who is a minister of our church, he plans to come over and give us Holy Communion right here on our Kingdom.*

On many occasions, George flew his mother, Esther Fiske Hammond and her butler, Yoshio H. Fukada, to visit the Lesters. Arriving for lunch or



tea, Mrs. Hammond often provided puddings, breads or special foods from Bonnymede's kitchen or eggs from the estate's large chicken ranch.

The Lesters endearingly referred to the island as the Kingdom of San Miguel. Betsy Lester Roberti recently wrote, "Father had a custom canvas mailbag made... [and] the bag was inscribed: George F. Hammond, Bonnymede, Air Mail, Kingdom of San Miguel Island."

The Lesters were fondly called the "royal family" and the media loved the idea of the little family that lived on the remote island. The Santa Barbara Publicity Bureau wrote, "The only regular connection with the mainland that the marooned royal family has is their private airmail service, the only one of its kind in the world." The family visited Santa Barbara each year for a two-week vacation, and gained a degree of notoriety, with reporters tagging along after them for their first visits to a movie theatre, shoe shop, and ice cream parlor.

Most of the year they lived quietly in their island kingdom at the mercy of the weather and demands of the ranch. It could be a month between supply boats, so the Lesters were well aware of how much they depended on George Hammond for emergency services and medical supplies as well as mail, food and ranching necessities. Elise wrote that, privately, they called him St. George. "When Elise was quite sick," George wrote, "I flew over medical supplies and a doctor."





PHOTOS: COURTESY SETH HAMMOND

In 1934, Herbie expressed his gratitude for George's assistance when he also required a medical procedure on the mainland:

*When I stop to think of all your kindness to us, especially during my stay in the hospital when you flew over an hour after my operation to tell Elise everything was fine, and then your kind thought in coming way down to see me twice at the hospital (Los Angeles), I am really at a loss to know just how to express my appreciation.*

In 1936, George received a note of thanks from 5-year old Marianne Lester:

*Dear Uncle George, It was kind and thoughtful of you to make a special trip over to our little Kingdom to bring me that nice jar of ointment your doctor gave you for the ringworm on my cheek." She adds, "Much love from us all, and good luck always to you and your famed Beechcraft Cabin Plane."*

For Elise Lester, originally a New York debutante and the product of a private finishing school, Hammond's plane also meant the ability to reconnect with society. In her memoir, she explained, "Now I could literally spread my wings and become a social butterfly once more. Visitors became almost commonplace. We soon were extending hospitality to most of Santa Barbara Society. San Miguel became the place to go for a short cruise. The 'in' place of its time."



Top ~ George Hammond watches as Herbie Lester raises the international distress signal (the American flag flying upside down) which was used to indicate an emergency on the island, circa 1938. Once it was raised for 13 days before help arrived. The flagpole was crafted from a salvaged mast.

Bottom ~ Herbie Lester, left and David Gray, right, circa 1938. George Hammond's Beechcraft in the background. Soon after Gray was introduced to the island by Hammond, he began visiting and flying over supplies in his own Beechcraft Staggerwing called the "Gray Falcon."



Friends and family often accompanied George Hammond on his flights to San Miguel, a practice Herbie heartily encouraged. Two frequent passengers included George's close friends David Gray, Jr., and Santa Barbara attorney Julian Goux, who took flying lessons from George.

David Gray became friends with the Lesters and occasionally flew his own plane over, often alongside George's aircraft. His son, Montecito architect Paul Gray, recalls, "My father took me to San Miguel in his airplane when I was six years old; the Lester girls and I were about the same age. I was infatuated with the island. We spent the night, stayed in front of the house in sleeping bags. I remember Herbie as being quite eccentric." Seth Hammond, George's son, recalls that at one time, both his father and David Gray owned Beechcrafts and called themselves "the sons of Beeches."

Hammond also flew notable visitors over to San Miguel Island including aviatrix Bessie Owens and publisher George Putnam, who had been married to Amelia Earhart.

Herbie Lester always remained highly interested in George's aviation career and his aircraft. In November, 1934, Herbie wrote, "Accept our heartfelt congratulations on the wonderful new WACO Cabin Cruiser you now own. It is as fine both inside and outside as any Rolls Royce.... It certainly looked great out on Hammond Field."

"I am delighted that Hammond Field will be printed on the Government maps," Herbie later wrote, "as it's a fitting tribute to your rare skill as an aviator to have this distinction, and I will always be happy to realize you are the first person to establish a landing field on the little kingdom of San Miguel."

"I hope you know how much I appreciate your kindness and generosity to fly me back home yesterday with your rare skill in 27 minutes in your splendid WACO Cabin Plane," he wrote in 1935. The 27-minute flight was uncommonly quick for the time, and quite notable to Herbie Lester.

George Hammond visited the Lester family from 1934 to 1941, flying a number of different aircraft—from the Travel Air to a WACO Cabin Plane and a red, 1936 Beechcraft Staggerwing. "By my calculations," George wrote, "I made more than 200 flights to San Miguel."

The bombing of Pearl Harbor marked the beginning of the end of Hammond's flights and of island life for the Lester family. At Christmas, 1941, the International News Service reported the war had "grounded Santa Claus" from visiting Herbert Lester's children: "Wartime regulations grounding private planes along the west coast stopped this year's Christmas flight to the is-



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land, a custom started five years ago by George F. Hammond of Montecito." The Hammonds went east for the holidays, and David Gray, Jr., agreed to make the flight that year if it was authorized. Because of recent Japanese submarine activity, the government initially denied the flight request, but a permit was eventually given. David Gray, escorted by a Navy lieutenant, made the last Christmas flight to San Miguel with holiday presents and mail on December 26, 1941.

Midway through 1942 Herbie wrote the last chapter of a unique era in California history by taking his own life. George Hammond noted that "His shell shock, depression, and the misery of the war took a great toll." In addition, Herbie had recently lost two fingers and was unable to do as much ranch work as before.

Elise and the girls moved back to the mainland soon thereafter. Later, Elise wrote a book about her island life, *The Legendary King of San Miguel, The Lesters at Rancho Rambouillet*, with an introduction by George Hammond. Coming to San Miguel from New York, Elise lived over 10 years at the rustic island house, built with lumber dumped from an 1898 shipwreck. She crafted a blissful life together with Herbie and her two young daughters, with limited supplies and few

luxuries. In her book, she explains that she loved Herbie, her "lover, friend, companion and husband," and all her experiences on San Miguel.

In 1994, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of George Hammond's first landing on San Miguel, Marla Daily, director of the Santa Cruz Island Foundation, organized a small gathering on the island to commemorate the occasion. George Hammond's son, Seth, took a helicopter to the island to meet up with Betsy Lester, artist Meredith Brooks Abbott (Robert Brooks' daughter), Marla Daily and a park ranger.

"I wrote letters to each," Seth says, "and carried them in the canvas mail bag. I copied the handmade airmail stamp Herbie made for letters he sent Dad." Seth also brought along ice cream, a special treat George often flew over for the little Lester girls. "The Park Ranger read the introduction Dad wrote for Elise's book... I don't think there was a dry eye," he recalls. "Dad loved the Lesters and the time he spent out there with them. The day was off the chart wonderful." ♦

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*Special thanks to Seth Hammond, who shared his father's correspondence and photos, and to Marla Daily of the Santa Cruz Island Foundation for providing access to logbooks, correspondence and other materials relating to the story.*

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On July 9, 1994, the 60th anniversary of George Hammond's first flight to San Miguel Island, his son, Seth Hammond, delivered mail and ice cream to San Miguel in an event organized by the Santa Cruz Island Foundation. Left to right: Channel Islands National Park ranger Ian Williams, Betsy Lester Roberti, pilot Seth Hammond, Meredith Brooks Abbott, Aspen Helicopters' owner and copilot Charlie McLaughlin and Santa Cruz Island staff member Lauretta Kely.